

*The Church of England —  
Catholic but not  
Roman Catholic*

*by*

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THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND —  
CATHOLIC BUT NOT ROMAN CATHOLIC

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THE claim of the Roman Church to be the only Catholic Church is one which the Church of England has always repudiated. In England, as in other countries, popular speech frequently assumes that the title "Catholic" is equivalent to "Roman". I remember well one instance from my own childhood. At school one day we had used in Chapel the prayer "for all sorts and conditions of men", which includes the sentence: "More especially we pray for the good estate of the Catholic Church". Later, in the classroom, one of my fellow pupils asked our teacher why we prayed for the *Roman* Catholic Church, and received a sharp correction which impressed itself upon my mind. The very fact that in this prayer we speak, without explanation or hesitation, of "the Catholic Church" (which in the Bidding Prayer is described as "the whole congregation of Christian people dispersed throughout the whole world") indicates that the Church of England claims to be Catholic and is in no way prepared to allow the Roman Church to usurp this honourable and ancient title. The State, moreover, recognizes and accepts this claim, for in English law the word "Roman" is always included in documents when reference is intended to Roman Catholics, and the title "Catholic" by itself does not carry the restricted meaning.

Before considering more fully what the word "Catholic" implies, it must be emphasized that in claiming to be Catholic we do not reject the title "Protestant". Bishop Sanderson, who wrote the Preface to the 1662 revision of the Prayer Book declared that "the Episcopal



(that is, the true English Protestant) Divines stand in the middle way, distinguished from the Papists on the one hand and the Puritans [i.e., Presbyterians] on the other." Our Queen at her Coronation promised to "maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law". One of the sister Churches of the Church of England is officially entitled "The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America". For us the opposite of Catholic is not Protestant but heterodox: the opposite of Protestant is not Catholic but Papal. We would agree with Professor Paul Tillich when he writes that Catholic "substance" must be subject to the Protestant principle which "contains the divine and human protest against any absolute claim for a relative reality, even if this claim is made by a Protestant Church". In repudiating the Roman position which, in Father A. G. Hebert's words, involves "a confusion between the essential, God-given forms of the Church and the secondary or ecclesiastical forms; between the Divine and the human elements in the Church", the Church of England did not cease to be Catholic. Rather, as Bishop Christopher Wordsworth put it, "The Church of England became Protestant at the Reformation that it might be more truly and purely Catholic".

What do we mean, then, when in our regular Sunday worship we profess belief in—and our membership of—"One Catholic and Apostolic Church"? There are at least three aspects to Catholicity—wholeness of doctrine, continuity of life with the primitive Church, and universality of membership and mission. The earliest and most influential definition of Catholicity is that of Vincent of Lerins in his *Commonitorium* (A.D. 434): "In the Catholic Church," he declared, "we take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere,

always, and by all." It is clear that if this definition were taken seriously by the Roman Church (which of course gives formal assent to it) the claim of that Church to be truly Catholic would be destroyed. None of the modern Roman dogmas of Papal Infallibility, the Immaculate Conception, or the Assumption of the Virgin can stand when judged by this canon. And it was in order to purge herself of similar additions to or distortions of the primitive Catholic faith that the Church of England rejected many Roman doctrines in the sixteenth century. The purpose of our Reformers was as far as possible to recover the wholeness of truth held by the Church of the first centuries. Bishop Jewel in his famous *Apology for the Church of England* (1562) thus described our position: "We have indeed put ourselves apart, not as heretics are wont, from the Church of Christ, but as all good men ought to do, from the infection of naughty persons and hypocrites. . . We are come, as near as we possibly could, to the Church of the Apostles and of the old Catholic bishops and fathers . . . to the original and first foundation whence the ground of religion was first taken." It is characteristic of the Anglican position that our Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion lack the systematic thoroughness of the theologies of continental European Reformers, and that we have no name to place side by side with Calvin or Luther as the source of our theological distinctness. Richard Hooker, who comes nearest to occupying that position in Anglican thought, made his contribution after the main streams of reform had settled into definite channels. His great work *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1592-1600) is not an attempt to produce a new system of theology but seeks to unite what is truly Catholic in the thinking both of the Scholastics and of the Reformers. While we regard the errors of the Protestant



Reformers of the continent as in many ways far less serious than those of Rome, we maintain that they too, in different ways, have departed from full catholicity of doctrine. We humbly believe that in our formularies, despite (or perhaps because of) their lack of systematic coherence, we are nearer to the truth held by the early Church than Rome or Geneva. Professor Reinhold Niebuhr has borne testimony to the Catholicity of Anglican doctrine, which, he says, "at its best manages to combine all facets of the Christian doctrine of grace more truly than other Churches".

In the second place, Catholicism implies continuity of life with the Apostolic Church, in contrast with new or schismatic bodies. Throughout the controversies of the first five centuries, particularly those involving the Donatist schism of North Africa where no explicit doctrinal difference was at issue, the Catholic Church was that in which worship, order, and ministry were continuous with the past. In this sense also the Church of England believes itself to be Catholic, for at the Reformation it was able, through the grace of God, to preserve unbroken continuity of life with the early Church. In the Preface to the Ordinal we find this statement of the purpose of the Church of England: "It is evident unto all men diligently reading holy Scripture and ancient Authors, that from the Apostles' time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church . . . . And therefore, to the intent that these Orders may be continued, and reverently used and esteemed, in the Church of England . . ." In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as to-day, many Anglicans regarded the lack of episcopal ordination and Apostolic succession of ministry in the Reformed Churches of the continent as a necessary evil, as the price to be paid for freedom from Roman

domination and heresy; but they counted it a privilege not to be cast away that the Church of England should have been able to reform itself without breaking with the past. In reply to the Roman accusation of novelty and schism, to the question: "Where was the Church of England before the Reformation?" Anglican apologists replied, in the words of William Sherlock, that "they did not make a new Church, but only reformed and purged the old . . . which can no more make a new Church than a man's washing off the dirt makes a new face." Richard Hooker maintained the catholicity of the Church of England in the face of Roman criticism thus: "They ask us where our Church did lurk, in what cave of the earth it slept for so many hundreds of years together before the birth of Martin Luther? . . . We hope that to reform ourselves, if at any time we have done amiss, is not to sever ourselves from the Church we were of before. In the Church we were and we are so still . . . The indisposition of the Church of Rome to reform herself must be no stay unto us from performing our duty to God." The Church of England, therefore, claims to be the true Catholic Church in England, purged of medieval errors, but preserving in all other respects the continuous life of worship and faith which goes back to, and even beyond, the coming of Augustine to Canterbury in the sixth century.

But there is a third meaning in the word Catholic. Bishop Polycarp, at his martyrdom in the year A.D. 156, is reported to have prayed for "all the Catholic Church throughout the world", by which he meant the universal Church, in contrast with the Church of any one city or country. There is a sense in which no Church can be truly Catholic within history, for the Catholic Church in all its fulness, incorporating all the sons of God, is the subject



of Christian hope. Archbishop William Temple once confessed, "I believe in One Holy Catholic Church and sincerely regret that it does not at present exist." But within history that Church is Catholic which potentially includes within itself members of all races and classes, which takes seriously its evangelistic mission to the whole world. It may be asked: "How can the Church of *England* be Catholic in this sense?" The answer is that the Church of England is only one of a group of fifteen independent, self-governing Churches throughout the world. The Anglican Communion includes the "Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui" (Holy Catholic Church in China) and the "Nippon Sei Ko Kwai" (Holy Catholic Church of Japan). Therefore, however inadequate and still incomplete our world-wide missionary achievements may be, we are indeed Catholic in conception.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to show that the Church of England has a right—indeed a better right than the Roman Church—to the title Catholic. But it must not be supposed that in this claim there lies an arrogant denial of catholicity to other Churches. The Church of England does not claim to be the *only* Catholic Church, but to be a *true part* of the Catholic Church. Nor does it suppose that its Catholicity is perfect, or that it has nothing to learn from others. Any Church which supposes itself free from distortion in doctrine falls easily into the sin of Pharisaism. So long as divisions and schism exist between Christian people no one body can possess the fulness of truth or the fulness of life and tradition. Anglicans desire, not to unchurch others, but to share with them whatever of the wholeness of Catholicity we have been privileged by the mercy of God to preserve and enjoy.